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ABSTRACT

The growth of individuals participating in community problem solving activities within a rural setting was the focus of this study. Using grounded theory methodology, data was obtained from literature, interviews with participants in four rural community problem solving groups, and one participant-observation study of a rural community problem solving group with subsequent interviews. The data illustrated that individual growth did occur as a result of involvement in community problem solving activities. A model consisting of four categories of individual growth emerged from the data. These categories, based upon a person's relationship to life, include (1) stance toward self, (2) stance toward others, (3) stance toward life, and (4) stance toward knowledge/process. Within each of these categories, specific properties (indicators of growth) were identified. Some examples of these properties from the four categories respectively are (1) self awareness and sense of personal worth, (2) understanding of others and appreciation of others, (3) depth of involvement, (4) knowledge and appreciation of problem solving processes and (5) future orientation. (In the concluding sections, this paper discusses the interrelationships that exist within the model of individual growth and the challenges that adult educators face to maximize the growth of individuals participating in community problem solving activities.) (EM)

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TOWARD A DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUAL GROWTH IN THE CONTEXT OF RURAL COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING

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INTRODUCTION

With the death of one doctor, the forthcoming retirement of another and the third remaining doctor threatening to dissolve his practice due to overwork, a low income rural county of 8,500 persons faced a serious crisis in the health care services of its residents. A steering committee of eight men was appointed to spearhead efforts to alleviate this crisis. Eighteen months later these same individuals attended the dedication of a new million dollar medical facility--a completely staffed and equipped clinic.

Traditionally such community development or community problem solving efforts and their success or failure have been measured largely by economic yardsticks. The economist, reflecting on these efforts would note the existence of a new building, the creation of new jobs and the broadened tax base.

More recently we have come to question the environmental impacts of community problem solving activities and interventions. We find the environmentalist asking such questions as "What affect will these efforts have on water quality?", "Are certain species of flora and/or fauna now endangered?", "Will air pollution result?"

But what of the educative impact of these community problem solving efforts? What effect has the problem solving efforts directed by these eight men had on their own lives and the lives of the other residents of the county? Or should we, as adult educators, even ask the question at all?

My personal belief, one shared by many others,[1,2,3,4] is that rural community problem solving is a potential adult education setting, albeit one somewhat neglected or unrecognized by some adult educators. The community provides us with a variety of educational resources; the problems ordinary communities and their citizenny face in our changing environment, the variety of knowledge and experiences, as well as the energies and enthusiasm of community members, the range of material available to be applied to problematic situations etc. The breadth and depth of educational opportunities seems endless. But, in order to enhance the growth potential of such fertile situations we must begin to further explore the nature of the educative impact, or growth which may occur in these settings! We must begin to view adult education not only as a MEANS to enhance community problem solving but we must also begin to recognize the education of adults as a

legitimate and essential END of community problem solving activities.

If we are to enhance the educative impact of community problem solving activities we must begin to better understand the nature of the growth that can occur in individuals in this context.

METHODOLOGY

John Dewey's theoretical definition of growth--that of the "constant expansions of horizons and consequent formation of new purposes, new responses"[5] served as a starting point to develop an operational definition of individual growth in the context of rural community problem solving. The methodology selected was an inductive, qualitative research methodology termed "grounded theory" as developed by Glaser and Straus and elaborated in their book The Discovery of Grounded Theory[6]. As you recall, grounded theory is essentially an inductive approach to research which focuses on social interaction and observation to build theory "grounded" in data rather than to test or describe empirical phenomenon. The major strategy for furthering the discovery of grounded theory is constant comparison. That is, in order to discover tha basic conceptual elements of theory, one systematically compares similar and dissimilar events and situations. In this way a theory is generated such that it is applicable to the social behavior under study.

In this particular study data came from the following sources: literature in adult education, community development, psychology, etc.; post hoc interviews with participants in four rural community problem solving groups using open ended questions; one participant-observation study of a rual community problem solving group with subsequent post hoc interviews; problem solving group records and/or minutes, local newspaper accounts, and personal experiences in rural community problem solving groups.

Using the theoretical definition of growth posited by Dewey, data from the sources mentioned were reviewed for instances of growth. Each time data were collected and reviewed they were compared with previously collected data. This process of constant comparison provided insights into other instances of growth that might be looked into to confirm or refute the emerging categories and properties of the model of individual growth generated.

A MODEL EMERGES

The literature and data from both post hoc interviews with participants and from a participant-observation study illustrated that individual growth does occur as a result of involvement in community problem solving activities. This gives us our starting point.

INDIVIDUAL GROWTH —— What is it in the Context of Rural Community Problem Solving?

Figure 1
A Starting Point

Reviewing the literature and the field data further, we see a pattern emerging. Part of the data speaks to growth in the areas of self concept and self development--what we might consider growth related to one's self. Growth related to the individual's feelings, attitudes, understandings and actions with and towards others also seems evident. Looking further we find reference to the growth of changed attitudes and understandings of life and the individual's relationship to life. We also find a growing understanding and appreciation of problem solving processes themselves and the accumulation of knowledge and skills on a host of topics as a result of involvement in community problem solving processes. Thus the data from literature and field sources seem to indicate several categories of individual growth: growth related to one's self; growth related to interactions with others; growth related to life; growth pertaining to the areas of knowledge and process. (The term stance was selected to connote position, where one is at, which may be seen as broader than the word attitude which does not connote a cognitive or psychomotor dimension. Stance therefore is meant to connote all three domains--cognitive, affective and psychomotor.)

INDIVIDUAL GROWTH ——
- Stance toward Self
- Stance toward Others
- Stance toward Life
- Stance toward Knowledge/Process

Figure 2
Categories of Individual Growth

As we look more closely at the pool of data in each of the four categories we begin to see further definition within each of these categories. In other words, we find properties emerging which help us further elaborate each category. (Examples from our 'medical clinic' community problem solving group will serve as examples of these emerging properties.)

Stance Toward Self

Let's begin to look at but a few examples or indicators of individual growth, stance toward self as illustrations of how these properties I referred to begin to elaborate the four categories of individual growth. One major task is establishing the medical facility was the fund raising dimension. The task of approaching the larger businesses in the county was a difficult one as these businesses had a record of non support of of county efforts. The individual selected to canvas this group noted pleasant surprise at discovering a fund raising capability he didn't know existed when he stated, with pride "I talked some people into it (contributing to the building fund). These big businesses, they never gave anything in the past, it isn't their way. These are big co-operatives, but they still did come across." Growing self-awareness?--he thought so.

We also saw examples of growing sense of personal worth. Perhaps the example that remains most striking in my mind is that of sitting interviewing a 70 year old man listening to him relate his experiences of five years previous and hearing him say with such pride and misty eyes, "I have been here a long time, and I knew a lot of people and they knew me...and somehow they (the community problem solving group that approached him for help) thought I could do some good". He was so proud of being asked to help and he did, taking part in a community problem solving group for the first time in his life. He remains actively involved even today.

Indicators of regression also exist however. One individual announced bitterly, "My ideas were squelched". Sadly enough he had no idea why his suggestions were not acted upon, only that no one cared for his ideas.

Both explicitly and implicitly the literature notes an innate concern for self development in the growing individual. Several indicators emerge from the field data which speak to self development. For example, a minister in the group noted that he became involved in a course related to transactional analysis after several incidents in the group related to difficulties in one to one communications and general human relations. While he attributed this

new pursuit to a concern for self development, he noted his involvement in the problem solving group and the ensuing difficulties was one of the precipitating factors involved in the choice of the T.A. experience.

Thus from indicators derived from the literature and field data the properties of Stance toward Self emerge.

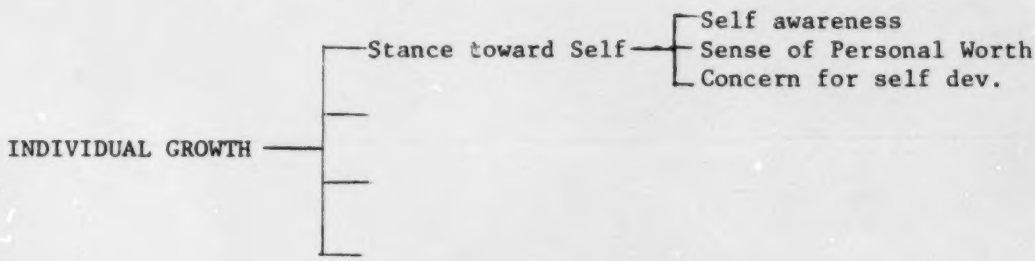

Figure 3
Properties of Individual Growth--Stance toward Self

Stance toward Others

While the literature provided few insights or indicators of individual growth related to others, this was not true of the field data. According to this field data, community problem solving processes provided an excellent opportunity to not only learn from each other, but also learn about each other.

Persons spoke of strengths of others they had not realized before. The chairperson of the community problem solving group in question noted, "I would say there were a lot of people that showed signs of leadership among those who were involved...that I would not have identified that way". One of the many indicators of the property understanding of others.

There also seemed to be a growing appreciation of others. Expressions such as "he was a real asset to us", "there were so many things that wouldn't have gotten off the ground if we hadn't had X to instigate the whole thing", "all of the fellows that worked in the group were very good", go on forever. Persons praising others for their efforts.

Fromm[7] suggests that one experience which serves as a means-end to growth, is responsibility--"responsibility connoting a humane conscience". I would like to share an example from a different problem solving group, a group involved in relocation of a Vietnamese family, to serve as an example of the next property of Stance toward Others. One woman interviewed described herself as "not the volunteer type". She was normally not involved in community problem solving activities and only became involved at the request

of her pastor. However when the problem solving group decided to become involved in relocating a second Vietnamese family she volunteered her help. When asked why she said, "you always think, let someone else do it, and nobody else was coming forth (to help) so I felt, in a way, maybe I could do something". One of the better examples of a growing concern for others.

There were many indicators in the field data of persons coming to the realization of the importance of co-operation and interdependence. For example, one individual noted "I learned to see the beauty of being able to work with other people." Another stated, "(I) learned if a group of individuals really get together and co-operate, they can do anything." As Shostrum[8] notes, interdependence is a new key to achieving full potential as a "total human being".

Viewing the category of individual growth, Stance toward Others, and its properties, the following framework emerges.

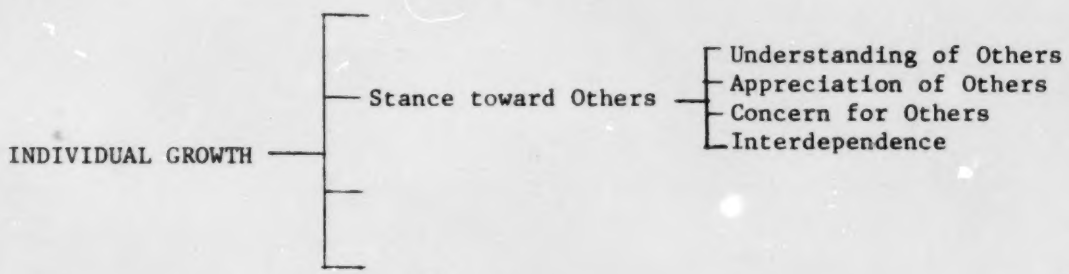

Figure 4
Properties of Individual Growth--Stance toward Others

Stance toward Life

The literature is abound with discussions of growth related to a changed understanding of and attitude toward life. Authors[9,10] speak of a growing person as one who becomes more active, open, interested and future directed rather than dwelling on the past and the present. Others[11,12] note the importance of the development of faith in one-self, hope for the future and a courage and willingness to fail.

Does rural community problem solving further individuals openness to the world around? Does it encourage and enhance a person's desire to become more active, more involved? One gentleman noted, "I discovered (through involvement in a community problem solving group) that there was more to life than sitting on your butt in front of the television." Others, such as the 70 year old gentleman mentioned earlier, have remained actively involved in

community affairs where they had not been active previously.

Thus one property of the category Stance toward Life generated by the data is depth of involvement.

While the literature supports a growing person as one who develops a future orientation, there is no direct evidence that individuals became more future oriented as a result of involvement in community problem solving processes. However, this may be more a matter of failure to maximize growth potential rather than anything else. As in any group or community of individuals, there are those who are future oriented, who look ahead, prepare for the future rather than simply fighting crises in the present. Several of these individuals commented in passing on future orientation. One indicated that individuals do not want changes in the status quo, thus fail to look for areas where changes are needed. Another noted, "one of the biggest needs is to center on what need is. Raise consciousness level. Unless we realistically look at our reality in the present, it is almost impossible to determine our future needs."

Several individuals did note, in retrospect, that they wished they had looked further into the future. For example a participant suggested "had we had the insight to go ahead with the thing when it was first suggested we would have the system now."

Thus, tentatively, I would suggest future orientation as a property of the category Stance Toward Life.

"I am very skeptical of starting a new adventure like this...it was very nerve wracking, because of so much uncertainty all the way through... had so many doubts because it was entirely new and if one thing went wrong..." An interesting comment, and out of context of the total interview one which appears to indicate regression. The individual noted later that it the need was great he knew he would be back in a problem solving group, attempting to deal with the problem at hand.

Many respondents seem to feel similarly. Most talk of being uncertain as to whether or not they could accomplish the goal decided upon, but all individuals speak of forging ahead anyway. Many are amazed, in retrospect, that they did continue when success was not a certainty. What caused this development of this courage and willingness to fail is unclear. One individual attributed his new found courage to the group "mind" which seemed to indicate they would succeed, when individually the group members were skeptical. Whether it can be attributed to new found hope, faith, sense of power, etc.,

indicators do point to the existence of a growing courage to fail in individuals as a property of the category Stance Toward Life.

Thus the category and its properties could be described as follows.

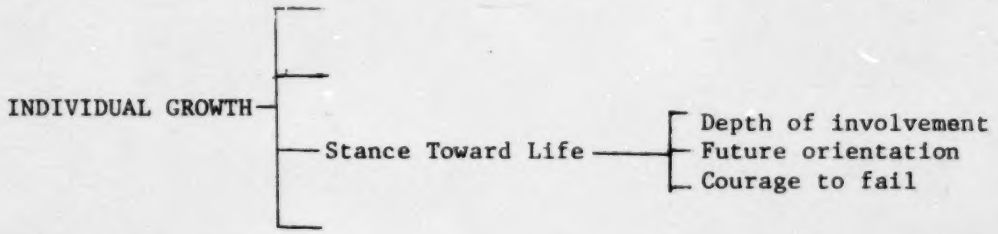

Figure 5
Properties of Individual Growth--Stance Toward Life

Stance toward Knowledge/Process

The literature and the field data provided a host of interesting insights and indicators related to the emergent category of Stance toward Knowledge/Process. One participant noted "Most of what I learned I learned through disillusionment...you begin with illusions and as they are tested you're relieved of illusions and you get a better understanding of reality." Perhaps so. Whether they learned from disillusionment, from doing what they thought was right and then reflecting on the results, the participants felt they had learned! And, for the most part, the learnings they shared related to: delegation of responsibility, use of resources, communications and the involvement of others within the area of problem solving processes. Thus emerged the property knowledge of problem solving processes.

Another property emerged as we reflected on field data, typified by this quote from a participant. "I tell you, I think it's rewarding to go through something like this, then actually see it operating. It really is rewarding." Individuals discovered the benefits and the beauty of community problem solving processes and affirmed this new attitude in continued involvement in these activities. Appreciation of problem solving processes then became another property of individual growth--Stance toward Knowledge/Process.

The range of "other knowledge" acquired as a result of involvement in community problem solving processes is as broad as the range of problems tackled. An indicator of the property titled other knowledge, for want of a better term, taken from the medical clinic case study is as follows. "With my knowledge now I would be very hesitant to pay $25,000 for a professional fund raiser...I think I could do it with help. A group could handle it themselves...only because we have seen it, because we have the records."

Thus the category, in its entirety would be depicted as follows.

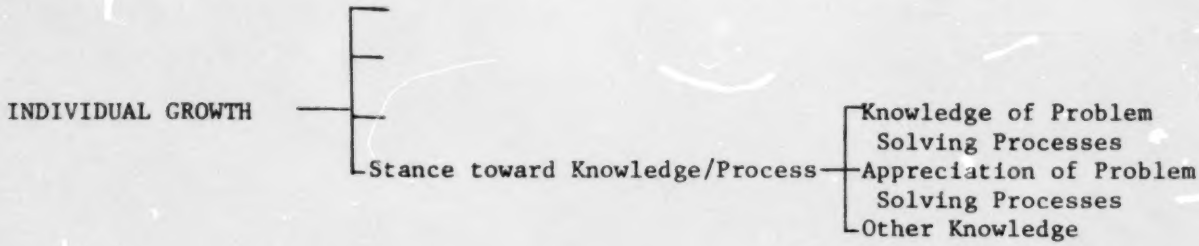

Figure 6
Properties of Individual Growth--Stance toward Knowledge/Process

Can an individual grow as a result of involvement in community problem solving processes? One man commented in this regard, "You can always learn from talking to others. You always learn something. You can learn something from anyone, no matter how dumb he is. He knows something you don't know." The evidence seems to bear him out. Bringing people together to work on community problems does indeed result in individual growth. The model proposed to depict this individual growth, its categories and its properties is as follows.

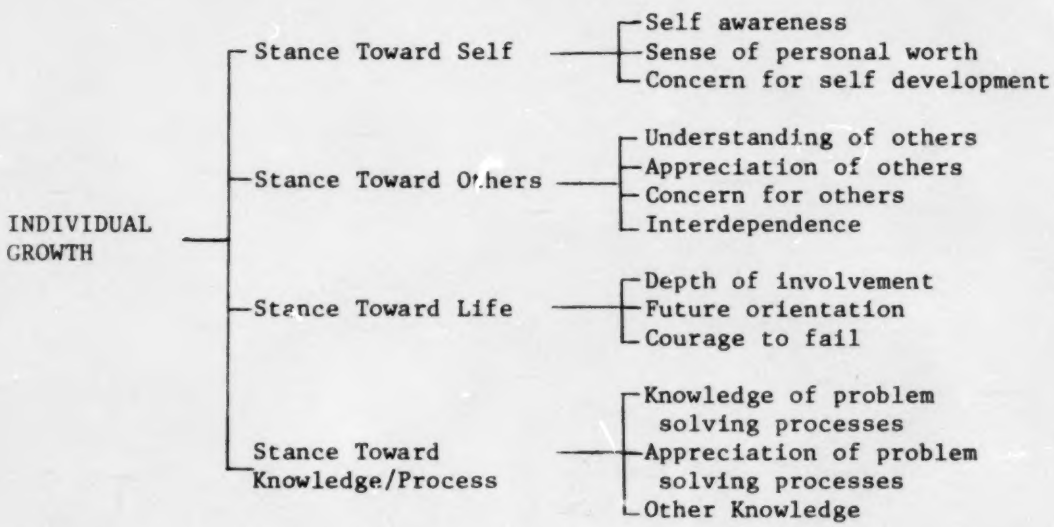

Figure 7

Categories and Properties of Individual Growth
in the Context of Rural Community Problem Solving

QUESTIONS EMERGE

Starting from the given that rural community problem solving processes can result in growth and/or regression as discussed earlier, a host of questions emerge. We might ask: What inter-relationships exist within the proposed model? What categories of individual growth seem more important, or are prerequisite to growth in other areas? Which categories and/or properties influence other categories and/or properties? What factors affect individual growth? If we could answer these questions then perhaps we, as adult educators, could gain further insights into ways of maximizing the growth potential of community problem solving processes.

Dewey [13] suggests that "intellectual growth...(is) impossible without an active disposition to welcome points of view hither to alien, an active desire to entertain considerations which might modify existing purposes. Retention of capacity to grow is the reward of such intellectual hospitality." Allport [14] suggests that "it is only through risk taking and variation that growth can occur". If this is indeed the case, it would appear that in order to grow one must become deeply involved in life; active and open to the world around, possessing a courage and a willingness to fail. The category of Stance toward Life, and an individual's growth in this category would therefore seem prerequisite to growth in any of the other categories of growth.

If an individual does have an open, active, involved Stance toward Life, either as a result of previous experience or as a direct result of the impact of community problem solving processes, then what? What avenues has this growth opened for further development? Let's speculate. There could be a direct effect on two categories of growth: Stance toward Knowledge/Process and Stance toward Self, and an indirect effect on Stance toward Others. First the direct effects.

It would seem that enhancing growth in Stance toward Life should serve to maximize potential for growth in the category of Stance toward Self. Being open to the world around, having the courage to look ahead, be involved in life also had the reward of providing the individual the opportunity to look at herself, who she is. The individual begins to question strengths and weaknesses, examine personal feelings toward herself. Her attitudes, values and beliefs are called into question. Areas for self development surface[15]. A growing understanding and acceptance of self emerges. Thus enhancing growth in the category of Stance toward Life appears to lead to simultaneous enhancing

of the potential for growth in the categories of Stance toward Knowledge/Process and Stance toward Self. In addition, enhancing growth in the category of Stance toward Life should increase the potential for growth in the category Stance toward Knowledge/Process.

One indirect outcome of growth in the category of Stance toward Life would seem to be individual growth in Stance toward Others. As Carl Rogers [16] notes, "when a person accepts himself, he is much more free to hear, understand and come close to the other. So we find more understanding and closer relationships...growing out of this self acceptance."

But what of the inter-relationship of Stance toward Knowledge/Process and the categories of growth related to self and others? While it does not seem that Stance toward Knowledge/Process shares a prerequisite relationship with Stance toward Life in relation to the other two categories, the category does bear some relationship. For example, an individual on reflecting on herself, discovers while she has an excellent grasp of the world of science, she has no understanding of the world of aesthetics. The beauty of the world is not open to her. This may prompt her to pursue experiences in traditional and non-traditional forms that speak to aesthetics. The individual who delves into the area of Oriental culture in order to better understand visitors from Vietnam would be another example. Thus, while Stance toward Knowledge/Process seems a legitimate category unto itself, it also appears to be a vehicle for growth in other categories, but not a prerequisite. Perhaps then, the chronology of growth enhancement could be depicted as follows, with double arrows of varying thickness to depict the major direction of the growth enhancing relationships (thick arrows) and the existence of a 'back and forth' relationship (thin arrows). The dotted lines depict the unique relationship of the category Stance toward Knowledge/Process.

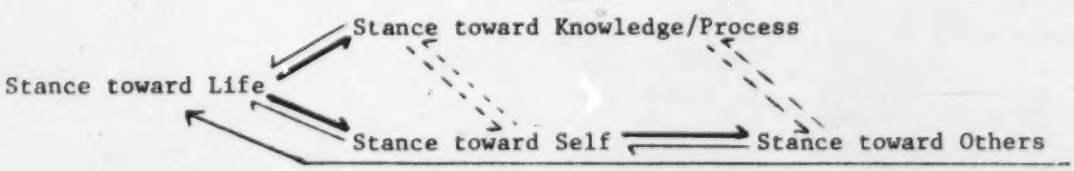

Figure 8

Speculative Chronology of Growth Enhancement

If we are to maximize individual growth in the context of community problem solving, we must begin to understand these types of relationsips.

We could raise similar questions regarding the inter-relationships among properties within categories. For example, does one have to grow in self awareness before changes occur in sense of personal worth? Is a concern for self development always a direct outcome of growth in the other two properties of Stance toward Self? Or, what relationship does a growing emphasis on interdependence in one's life have to understanding of and/or appreciation of others? Is a growing courage to fail prerequisite to a greater depth of involvement of life?

Not only must we be aware of the relationships within a model of individual growth in the context of community problem solving, we must also closely examine the influence of the problem solving processes on this individual growth. We must ask, if an individual is involved in a variety of community problem solving groups, is the growth outcome necessarily the same? Are there factors operating in each problem solving group which make the individual growth outcomes in one problem solving group unique in comparison with any other problem solving group and the individual group outcomes associated with that group. What are these influencing factors?

One factor, of factor complex related to the nature of the problem solving processes operating within the group. For example, a host of problem solving processes may be pursued. Each provides for varying participation patterns in decision making, actions taken etc. on the part of participants, with different growth outcomes. To a large extent these processes are dependent on the persons in the group, their expertise in problem solving techniques, methods employed in problem solution and the slant of the group experience toward individual or societal growth. Initial research findings indicate there is a direct relationship between the amount of interaction and involvement and individual growth.

The nature of the problem also appears to influence individual growth. One obvious impact on individual growth relates directly to the acquisition of 'other knowledge'. Some problems expose a person to one body of knowledge while other problems provide an opportunity to explore different areas. Also different problems lend themselves to different problem solving processes. Some problems lend themselves to group work, sub committees, fact finding groups while other problems may involve more solitary work. Therefore, potential for interaction among individuals varies greatly. Also coalitions among problem solving groups occur more readily if the nature of

the problem is such that is has broad implications and/or creates considerable interest within and outside of the community.

One over-riding factor complex relates to the community in which the problem solving group evolves from. As Thelen [17] notes, "the larger community makes a real difference as to what a group can do and the means by which it can do it." The host of values, beliefs, traditions held by the community coupled with the availability of such resources as money, material, people-power, determine to a large extent, the problem solving avenues.

We must continually ask ourselves, what other factors affect individual growth in the context of rural community problem solving? How can we, as adult educators, begin to maximize the potential for individual growth by working with others to minimize the obstacles to this growth?

GROWTH AND THE ADULT EDUCATOR

If we are to maximize the growth potential of community problem solving transactions, it must be from an educative stance. An understanding of the growth possible in such a context is but a small step in the right direction. Dewey [18] suggested that "a primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principles of shaping of actual experience by environing conditions but that they also recognize in concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all they should know how to utilize the surrounding, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile (conducive to growth)." In essence, the adult educator is challenged to assume the role of designer of an educational environment that maximizes the potential for growth in individuals in the context of community problem solving. This is not to say the adult educator must do this, do that, perform this function or that function. What is says is that the adult educator must ensure that the community problem solving environment is such that growth is maximized. Who performs the various specific functions within this environment becomes inconsequential. For example, as we view growth outcomes of various community problem solving groups we note that much of this growth occurs incidentally.

Let's look more closely. Learnings are often isolated from their theoretical underpinnings. In other words, sometimes persons understand what went wrong, but not the why and the how to avoid such an error the next time. In this instance the adult educator is challenged to design an environment

of purposeful reflection such that persons evaluate what they see happening around them, explore the reasons for these occurences, and devise alternatives to either prevent or enhance the occurence of these situations in the future. The adult educator does not have to be the evaluator, nor does she necessarily even have to be the instigator of the question, "hey! what went wrong?" She does however have to design an environment where a reflection-action praxis [19] exists.

This general role of 'designer of an environment of growth' changes the question from what specific functions must an adult educator perform to enhance growth in the context of community problem solving to what environmental conditions in the community problem solving arena are conducive to growth? The emphasis swings from 'who must do something?' to 'what must be done?'. Once again the 'who' becomes inconsequential. In our above example, we stressed the importance of evaluation. The adult educator need not be the evaluator, what is important is that evaluation occur. We have seen the importance of involvement, of delegation responsibility and authority to members to enhance growth in community problem solving activities. The educator need not assume the role of delegator or encourager of others to become involved. What she must do is ensure that conditions exist to allow these things to happen.

Therefore as we, as adult educators, begin to search for ways of maximizing the educative growth of individuals, problem solving groups and communities, we must begin to ask, what was it in the environment in those groups, particularly those without adult educators, that served to maximize educative growth outcomes? If we simply direct our concern to what the adult eduator is doing we lose sight of such factors as, the power of the transactions among group members, and the impact of situations both internal and external to the group.

CHALLENGES

The challenges that face adult educators are vast. As a field, we have all but ignored community problem solving processes as a legitimate arena for adult education. When we have given token acknowledgement to the impact of this mode, we have sought to evaluate its influence in terms and by standards from other disciplines and fields. For example, we find ourselves making reference to environmental impact, economic implications, we speak of quantities, oft times ignoring the qualitative dimension. At times we approach the community problem solving arena as social planners, engaging in

community problem solving for the people rather than with the people.

We must begin to give serious consideration to this area of adult education. Questions such as, what is the nature of educative growth in individuals (both within and outside of the community problem solving group), the problem solving group itself and the community as a result of involvement in community problem solving processes ?, what inter-relationships exist within each specific dimension of educative growth?, what factors influence this educative growth?, must be answered. Looking more broadly yet, we must begin to pursue questions such as, what are the inter-relationships among educative growth and other areas of growth, such as economic, environmental and political?

As adult educators we would be remiss if we failed to respond to one additional challenge: to determine what situations or environments are conducive to educative growth. This must be carried out not only by looking at ourselves but at all situational factors within this community transactional mode of education.[20] These insights will serve as valuable inputs to help adult educators design more educative environments for community problem solving.

In The Meaning of Adult Education, Lindeman[21] suggested that, "life is confronted in the form of situations, occasions which necessitate action. Education is a method for giving situations a setting, for analyzing complex wholes into manageable, understandable parts and a method which points out the path of action which, if followed, will bring out the circumstance within the area of experiment. Since the education is best which most adequately helps us meet situations, the best teaching method is one which emerges from situation-experiences." The community problem solving context seems to provide one such situation in which the adult educator could and should function to maximize the educative growth of individuals, problem solving groups and communities.

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FOOTNOTES

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